HOW TO COMPOST LEAVES
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Leaves are often referred to as "Gardeners' Gold". Their bright green appearance in Spring is a harbinger of a new life cycle; in Summer provide much needed shelter from heat and rain for wildlife and humans; in Fall dramatic beauty; in Winter used as mulch or compost they provide outstanding organic matter and nutrients to the soil.

Unfortunately, leaving a thick layer of leaves on your lawn or garden can create conditions that lead to rotting of the grass or perennials beneath. So, to start with, rake the leaves up into a pile.

Once your leaves have been gathered, you have a choice between using them undecomposed, as mulch, or composting them before you put them in your garden. Regardless of how you are going to use them, the first step is to chop or shred your leaves. This will save space if you are placing them in a bin, and will hasten their eventual decomposition into composted organic matter.

If you do not have a shredder, and do not wish to rent one, you can use your lawn mower to shred the leaves. Gather leaves in a pile and run the lawn mower through the pile. Once you have your shredded leaves, you may place them in your garden as mulch immediately.

Do not place an excessive layer of mulch directly on the crowns of herbaceous perennial flowers. This is not necessary, and it can lead to root rot. Extend the season for winter root vegetables, like rutabagas, carrots, leeks, kale or beets, by using a heavy layer of shredded leaves to cover them. You can harvest these vegetables all winter with this added protection.

Another alternative for your shredded leaves is to compost them, either alone or with other organic matter. The simplest but longest process is to place the shredded leaves in a wire bin. Leave them there for two years, turning them occasionally, and you will have a really nice product. The only disadvantage of using leaves alone for composting is you will find that you need a tremendous amount of leaves to produce any quantity of compost.

Leaves can be used more effectively as a component in a compost pile that contains a variety of organic matters. A good balanced compost pile contains materials rich in nitrogen and others rich in carbon. Leaves can provide the carbon component of your pile. Good carbon components include straw, nonglossy paper, wood and bark chips. Good nitrogenous materials include grass and plant clippings, uncooked fruit and vegetable scraps, eggshells, and coffee grounds. Use your shredded leaves and other carbon materials to layer between your nitrogenous materials in a bin.

Turn the pile occasionally to aerate it, making sure it is moist, but not soggy. It is not necessary to add commercial compost starters or fertilizer. The time it will take to produce compost depends upon the pile’s size, composition and conditions. The process can take anywhere from
three months to one year. My small suburban compost bins take 6 to 9 months. I cut the materials I am placing in the piles into small pieces, and I turn the piles about once every 3 to 4 weeks.

I find reusing organic materials such as leaves for mulch and compost to be one of the most satisfying aspects of my gardening. I hope you will give it a try.

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